DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 389 016 CS 509 074

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TITLE Exploring the Assimilation Stage of GTA Socialization: A Preliminary Investigation.
PUB DATE Nov 95
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (81st, San Antonio, TX, November 18-21, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acculturation; Communication Research; *Graduate Students; Higher Education; *Socialization; *Student Attitudes; Student Surveys; *Teaching Assistants
IDENTIFIERS Communication Behavior; Research Suggestions

ABSTRACT

A preliminary study explored the components of the assimilation stage of graduate teaching assistant (GTA) socialization. Subjects, 64 GTAs attending a large midwestern university, completed 4 survey instruments concerning their attitudes on mentoring and communication support, information seeking strategies, teacher communication concerns, and organizational socialization tactics. Results indicated that supportive communication relationships correlated with information-seeking practices, teacher communication concern, and organizational socialization tactics; and information-seeking practices correlated with teacher communication concern and organizational socialization tactics. Partial correlation analysis revealed three significant findings: supportive communication relationships and organizational socialization tactics; information-seeking practices and teacher communication concern; and supportive communication relationships and information-seeking practices. Findings suggest that communication is a central component of GTA socialization. Future research should explore mentor-protege relationships, peer relationships, and information seeking. (Contains 53 references and 2 figures of data.) (RS)

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Exploring the Assimilation Stage of GTA Socialization: A Preliminary Investigation

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Exploring the Assimilation Stage of GTA Socialization: A Preliminary Investigation

Introduction

Organizational socialization has been defined as "the process by which a person learns the values, norms and required behaviors which permit him [sic] to participate as a member of the organization" (Van Maanen, 1976, p. 67). During the socialization process, the individual is transformed from an organizational outsider (Feldman, 1976) to an effective organizational member who has been provided with the knowledge, ability, and motivation to perform such a role (Van Maanen, 1976).

Organizational socialization has been operationalized in many models (Buchanan, 1974; Feldman, 1976, 1981; Jablin, 1987; Porter, Lawler, & Hackman, 1976; Schein, 1978; Van Maanen, 1976; Wanous, 1992), but researchers generally agree that three stages of socialization exist. The first stage is the entry stage, and is considered an anticipatory stage where individuals begin to prepare for future organizational positions. The second stage is the assimilation stage. During this stage, the newcomer confronts the organizational reality and decides whether to accept it (Wanous, 1992). The third stage is the exit stage. At this point, an individual disengages from the organization for various reasons, which may include job transfer, organizational change, or retirement (Jablin, 1987).

In the communication discipline, two models of socialization exist: (a) Jablin's (1987) model of organizational socialization, in which organizational newcomers progress through three stages (i.e., entry, assimilation, exit), and (b) Staton and Hunt's (1992) model of teacher socialization, in which elementary and secondary school teachers progress through two stages (i.e., preservice, inservice). However, research is inconclusive about the steps that graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) take to become socialized in their new role. Quite simply, little research has been conducted regarding the GTA socialization process.

Myers (1994b) developed a phasic model of GTA socialization based on a synthesis of the organizational, instructional, and GTA socialization literature. Central to the model lies the premise that communication is the underlying socializing agent. The model is composed of three stages: (a) anticipatory, (b) assimilation, and (c) exit. Previous research has explained the model in detail (Myers, 1994b). Additional research has explored the anticipatory stage of GTA socialization (Myers, 1995a).

The purpose of this paper is to explore components of the assimilation stage of GTA socialization. Because little research has been conducted on the assimilation stage and the components which comprise the stage, an investigation appears warranted.

Review of Literature

Assimilation refers to the mutual influence process that occurs between the individual and the organization (Jablin &

Krone, 1987). During this stage, organizational members are integrated into the reality or culture of the organization (Jablin, 1982) over a period of time with hopes of getting newcomers to share the same norms and values of the organization (Wanous, 1992). The assimilation stage consists of the encounter phase and the metamorphosis phase.

For the GTA, the encounter phase is best regarded as a survival stage (Petty & Hogben, 1980; Ryan, 1986). This usually occurs when the GTA is confronted by the accepted organizational behaviors and attitudes (Jablin, 1987). Porter et al. (1975) described this phase as consisting of the daily experiences during which organizational policies and procedures are reinforced upon new organizational members. At any point, discrepancies between expectations and the reality of organizational life surface.

In order for the GTA to become indoctrinated into the educational institution, the GTA must undergo a process known as metamorphosis. Metamorphosis refers to the acquisition of the appropriate behaviors, attitudes, and values that allow the newcomer to become part of the organization (Jablin, 1987). During this time, the newcomer decides how to integrate into the organization as a full member (Van Maanen, 1976). Essentially the newcomer must accept the organizational reality (Schein, 1978) by learning new attitudes and behaviors or modifying existing ones that are congruent with the organization's expectations (Jablin, 1984).

Myers (1994b) proposed that four components constitute the GTA assimilation stage of socialization. Specifically, he suggested that the GTA's (a) supportive communication relationships, (b) information-seeking practices, (c) teacher communication concern, and (d) additional socialization tactics offered by the academic institution all influence the rate of GTA socialization.

Supportive communication relationships. For the GTA, two significant communication relationships exist: (a) the mentor-protege relationship and (b) the peer relationship. Mentors are experienced organizational members who help newcomers develop interpersonal, technical, and political skills (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993). During the early phases of a newcomer's entry, the mentor-protege relationship offers advice, information, professional sponsorship, and support (Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993). Roche (1979) noted that business executives who were mentored tend to earn more money, follow a career plan, are better educated, and receive more pleasure from work. In short, mentors are a critical force behind the training and development of protege careers (Kram, 1988).

In graduate school, mentors are responsible for degree program design and learning activity selection, monitoring, evaluation, and achievement (Bradley, 1981). In a study of college professors, Hill, Bahniuk, and Dobos (1989) found that over 80% had been involved in a mentor-type relationship while in graduate school. They found that patterns of communication and

academic success differed between those who had mentors and those who had not. Graduate students who reported being mentored had lower levels of communication apprehension, received more support, and perceived an adequate flow of information between mentor and protege than their unmentored peers (Hill et al., 1989).

In a study of first-semester GTAs, Myers (in press) found mentors are instrumental in addressing the teaching, academic, and professional concerns of new GTAs. Moreover, academic mentors provide proteges with insights on how to utilize risk-taking behaviors, communication skills, political skills, and professional skills (Bova & Phillips, 1984).

The peer relationship, however, adds a sense of mutuality and equality to a relationship that the mentor-protege relationship is unable to provide (Kram, 1983). Darling (1987) found that new and experienced GTAs act as important "accidental" socializing agents. Generally, GTAs prefer asking their peers for information (Duba-Biedermann, 1994). New GTAs are more likely to share their concerns and experiences with each other than with other experienced people in the department (Darling, 1987) and aid one another in the day-to-day sense-making, adjustment, and skill development (Darling & Staton, 1989). Furthermore, experienced GTAs act as interpretive guides for newcomer GTAs (Darling & Staton, 1989; Puccio, 1987) and provide necessary resources for developing the attitudes and skills needed for the GTA role (Darling, 1987). More recently, Myers (in press) discovered that faculty members or other GTAs are most likely to be selected as mentors by newcomer GTAs.

Information-seeking practices. The assimilation stage is often characterized by a search for accurate information (Schein, 1978) and a confirmation or disconfirmation of expectations (Buchanan, 1974; Porter et al., 1975). For the GTA, information acquired from the faculty is deemed a necessity. Sustained interaction with faculty creates graduate students who have a stronger sense of self-identity (Kirk & Todd-Mancillas, 1991; Weiss, 1981). Highly active graduate students also receive more sponsorship and forms of encouragement from their advisers than less active students (Corcoran & Clark, 1984). Furthermore, GTAs who are provided with useful information by their advisers develop better work relationships, are more committed to the academic role, and are more productive (Gottlieb, 1961; Green, 1991; Weiss, 1981).

Peer relationships also provide newcomers with the capabilities for sense-making, information exchange, and acceptance as well as being a method through which newcomers transform into insiders (Reichers, 1987). Myers (1994a) found that GTAs generally rate interactions with newcomer GTAs, other GTAs, and the department secretary as being among the most available and the most helpful socialization practices. Conversely, campus-wide training programs, departmental orientations, and business trips were rated among the least available and the least helpful socialization practices.

Teacher communication concern. Teacher communication concerns that arise during the assimilation stage focus on the uncertainty that GTAs experience when engaged in the new teaching role. Staton-Spicer and Marty-White (1981) examined the relationship between a teacher's communication concerns and teaching behaviors. They concluded that the three types of concerns--self, task, and impact--are correlated with specific teaching behaviors.

Few studies have been conducted on teacher communication concerns of GTAs, but the results suggest that newcomer GTAs express more self concern than task or impact concern. As the semester progresses, the number of task concerns increases (Book & Eisenberg, 1979; Darling & Dewey, 1990). For most new GTAs, these concerns are couched in either the acceptance or the challenge of thematic messages about teaching and learning. Accepted messages are reflective of self concerns whereas task and impact concerns are typical of challenges (Darling & Dewey, 1990).

Organizational socialization tactics. The assimilation stage is further influenced by the academic institution's use of socialization tactics. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) argued that socialization tactics encourage either a custodial-role orientation or an innovative-role orientation, which Jones (1986) termed institutional and individual. Institutional socialization involves the use of collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture tactics whereas an individual socialization program includes the use of individual, informal, random, variable, disjunctive, and divestiture tactics (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Individuals who are socialized using institutionalized tactics are likely to embrace a custodial role orientation and conform to organizational norms and values whereas individuals who undergo an individualized form of socialization are likely to become innovative in their work (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Jones, 1986).

Summary. During the assimilation stage, the GTA struggles to become an accepted member of the educational institution. The GTA accomplishes this by (a) adjusting to the organization and attempting to participate as a new member (Feldman, 1976) and (b) developing the appropriate skills, role behaviors, norms, and values that allows participation as a full-fledged organizational member (Feldman, 1981). For GTAs, it is proposed that four components (supportive communication relationships, information seeking practices, teacher communication concern, and organizational socialization tactics) affect their socialization process.

Rationale

Research conducted on the assimilation stage of socialization has been primarily explored in the organizational arena (Jablin, 1984; Jablin, 1987; Jablin & Krone, 1987), which is one reason why reason should be conducted in the GTA domain. Furthermore, the components identified by Myers (1994b) have been

largely studied using populations other than GTAs (e.g., Jablin, 1984; Jones, 1986; Kram & Isabella, 1985). By examining these components within the GTA domain, it is possible to explore the impact the components may have on the socialization process. Thus, the following research question is posited:

RQ1 What relationship exists among supportive communication relationships, information-seeking practices, teacher communication concern, and organizational socialization tactics?

To further examine the relationships between each of the variables, the following research questions were developed:

RQ2a What relationship exists between supportive communication relationships and information-seeking practices?

RQ2b What relationship exists between supportive communication relationships and teacher communication concern?

RQ2c What relationship exists between supportive communication relationships and organizational socialization tactics?

RQ2d What relationship exists between information-seeking practices and teacher communication concern?

RQ2e What relationship exists between information-seeking practices and organizational socialization tactics?

RQ2f What relationship exists between teacher communication concern and organizational socialization tactics?

Metnod

Participants

Eighty-five questionnaires were distributed to GTAs enrolled at a large midwestern university. Sixty-four (N = 64) questionnaires were returned, constituting a return rate of 76%.

Two respondents failed to provide any demographic data. Of the 62 respondents who did provide such data, 22 were men and 40 were women. Thirty-one (n = 31) were enrolled in a master's level degree program and 31 were enrolled in a doctoral program. The average age of the GTA was 27 years (SD = 2.35). Twenty-two (N = 22) of the respondents were first-year GTAs.

Procedures and Instrumentation

Participants were asked to complete four instruments in addition to the demographic data profiled above. Due to the anonymity of the project, respondents were not asked to identify themselves or their academic unit. After survey completion, GTAs were instructed to return the instruments to the researcher via campus mail.

The four instruments completed were: (a) the Mentoring and Communication Support scale (Hill et al., 1989); (b) the Information Seeking Strategy Instrument (Miller, 1988); (c) the Teacher Communication Concern scale (Staton-Spicer, 1983); and (d) the Organizational Socialization Tactics scale (Jones, 1986). All responses were generated using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1).

The Mentoring and Communication Support scale is a 30-item scale designed to measure dimensions of supportive communication. Used in both organizational and academic settings, the scale has yielded three or four factors depending on the surveyed sample. Previous reliability coefficients ranging from .75 to .88 have been reported for the factors (Hill et al., 1989). In this study, 17 items measuring the mentor-protege, the collegial-task, and the collegial-social factors were used. A coefficient alpha of .86 was obtained for the scale (M = 55.44, SD = 10.76).

The Information Seeking Strategy Instrument is a 19-item scale designed to measure the amount of information sought by organizational newcomers. The scale measures the use of five types of information seeking strategies: overt, indirect, third party, testing, and observing. A previous reliability coefficient of .76 was reported for the scale (Mignerey, 1991). In this study, 12 items measuring the overt, indirect, and observing strategies were used. A coefficient alpha of .69 was obtained for the scale (M = 40.84, SD = 5.78).

The Teacher Communication Concern scale is a 15-item scale designed to measure three dimensions of teacher communication concern: self, task, and impact. Previous reliability coefficients ranging from .84 to .89 have been reported for the factors (Staton-Spicer, 1983), and from .94 to .97 for the overall scale (Rubin & Feezel, 1986). In this study, all 15 items were used. A coefficient alpha of .94 was obtained for the scale (M = 52.93, SD = 15.09).

The Organizational Socialization Tactics scale is a 30-item scale designed to measure six factors of socialization tactics: collective/individual, formal/informal, investiture/divestiture, sequential/random, serial/disjunctive, and fixed/variable. Previous reliability coefficients ranging from .62 to .84 have been reported for the factors (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Jones, 1986), and a reliability coefficient of .83 has been reported for the summed scale (Mignerey, 1991). In this study, 18 items (three items represented each factor) were used. A coefficient alpha of .82 was obtained for the scale (M = 51.96, SD = 10.72).

Data Analysis

Research question one was answered using a Pearson Product-Moment correlation. Research questions 2a through 2f were answered using partial-correlation analysis.

Results

Research question one inquired about the relationship among the four components of GTA assimilation. With the exception of teacher communication concern and organizational socialization tactics, the relationships were significant (see Figure 1). Low to moderate relationships exist among the four components.

Research question two inquired about the relationship between each set of two variables, controlling for the other two variables (see Figure 2). Three significant relationships were found: research question 2c, supportive communication relationships and organizational socialization tactics, r = .46,

$p < .001$; research question 2d, information-seeking practices and teacher communication concern, $r = .32$, $p < .01$; and research question 2a, supportive communication relationships and information-seeking practices, $r = .31$, $p < .01$. Research questions 2b, 2e, and 2f did not yield significant findings.

Additional analyses examined whether GTA demographic variables affect GTA perceptions on each of the four measures. T-tests conducted on each of the four measures alternately using GTA gender, length of assistantship, and degree sought as the independent variable revealed no significant differences.

Discussion

This study explored the components which comprise the assimilation stage of GTA socialization. Because a separate measure of GTA socialization does not exist, the results garnered in this study may be limited in their application. In addition, the GTAs were all enrolled at the same university. Due to the variability of GTA training, supervision, and socialization that occurred in the GTAs' academic units, their responses may not be generalizable to the larger GTA population.

Research question one explored the relationship that exists among the four proposed components of GTA assimilation. It was found that supportive communication relationships was correlated with information-seeking practices, teacher communication concern, and organizational socialization tactics. Similarly, information-seeking practices was correlated with teacher communication concern and organizational socialization tactics. These findings suggest that communication is a central component of GTA socialization. By engaging in supportive communication relationships, GTAs can seek information, express teacher concern, and are influenced by socialization tactics.

The relationship between teacher communication concern and organizational socialization tactics was not significant. This finding suggests that the two variables are not related; perhaps teacher communication concern arises as a direct result of engaging in communication activity with significant others (e.g., GTAs, students, faculty). Newcomers GTAs, for example, do rely on experienced GTAs for guidance (Darling, 1987; Myers, 1994a). However, in a study of 143 newcomer GTAs, Myers (1995b) found that institutionalized role orientation is the sole predictor of teacher communication concern. GTAs who are provided with standardized policy and procedure, as well as role guidelines and expectations, may exhibit a level of teaching concern that is consistent with the university's level of teaching concern. Future research should continue to explore the link between teacher communication concern and organizational socialization tactics.

Research question two inquired about the relationships between each set of components. Partial-correlation analysis revealed three significant findings: (a) supportive communication relationships and organizational socialization tactics, (b) information-seeking practices and teacher communication concern,

and (c) supportive communication relationships and information-seeking practices. Again, these findings underscore the importance that communication plays in the GTA socialization process. Previous research has illustrated that socialization experiences exert causal influence on role orientation (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Jones, 1986). Organizational members who are socialized using institutional tactics are provided with channels of communication and communication relationships (Van Maanen, 1978). Consequently, GTAs who engage in supportive communication relationships may be able to gain a more thorough knowledge about their assistantship, their academic units, and their institution than GTAs who do not engage in supportive communication relationships.

Moreover, organizational members engage in interaction to receive information (Jablin, 1984). GTAs may solicit information from people they find supportive, such as other GTAs and faculty members. They may also discover the expectations and rules that guide their subsequent organizational behavior. Furthermore, interaction with organizational members (e.g., faculty, other GTAs) may influence the adjustment into the GTA role. Myers (in press) found that GTAs rely on faculty members and experienced GTAs for guidance and help in adapting to requirements of the new role.

Potee (1993) noted that GTAs always have a number of teacher communication concerns; however, these concerns may be diminished, strengthened, or changed due to the information-seeking practices employed by the GTA. GTAs may engage in information seeking as a way of determining if their communication concerns are legitimate, as a means of clarifying job expectations, or as a way of expressing role uncertainty (Myers, 1995b). According to Staton-Spicer and Marty-White (1981), teacher communication concern is reflective of the newness associated with the teaching position.

Feldman and Brett (1983) reported that information seeking is one way in which newcomers deal with the stress associated with joining a new organization. This idea has been documented in the GTA literature as well (Darling, 1987; Darling & Staton, 1989). Thus, GTAs may engage in supportive communication relationships as a means of eliminating this stress or as a means of learning more about their assistantship duties or their department. Messages, as well as these new relationships, are no doubt instrumental ways in helping GTAs become socialized in their new roles.

Three relationships were found to be not significant: (a) supportive communication relationships and teacher communication concern, (b) information-seeking practices and organizational socialization tactics, and (c) teacher communication concern and organizational socialization tactics. These findings can be explained in two ways. First, a GTA's number of teacher communication concerns may not necessarily be dependent on supportive others or the influence of organizational socialization tactics. Because many GTAs teach stand-alone,

autonomous classes (Anderson, 1992), information seeking may be the more pressing need. Second, a GTA's information-seeking practices may not be influenced by formalized socialization tactics because GTAs may be forced to use different types of information seeking strategies. Myers (1995b) found that newcomer GTAs most frequently use the overt information-seeking strategy in order to meet the demands of their assistantship and to complete their job duties. Because a primary concern of GTAs is receiving information about their job duties (Williams & Roach, 1992), they may use the most appropriate information-seeking strategy regardless of the influence of organizational socialization tactics.

An area of future study is the further exploration of mentor-protege relationships, peer relationships, and information seeking. Because GTA interpersonal relationships with faculty and peers have an effect on how they progress through the socialization process (Kirk & Todd-Mancillas, 1991), it would be fruitful to learn how these relationships contribute to the information-seeking process.

In any case, GTA socialization is worthy of further investigation. By defining and isolating the components of GTA socialization, it is possible to learn more about how GTAs become socialized into the academic profession.

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Figure 1. Pearson Product-Moment Correlations Among Components.

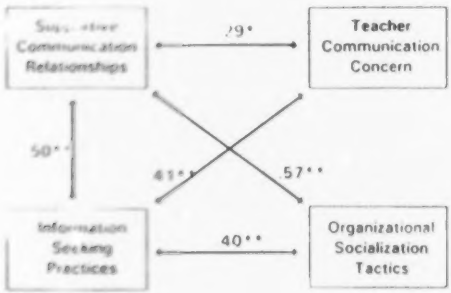
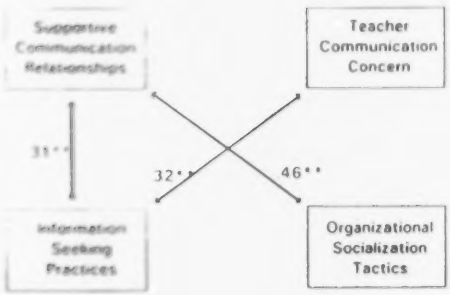


Figure 2. Significant Partial Correlations Between Components.



Note. **p <.01. ***p <.01.

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